

Some Basics of Old Testament Spirituality

First, what do we mean by spirituality? It's not a word that comes in the Bible, though that doesn't in itself mean it's not a biblical idea. In common parlance, spirituality often refers to our inner life and our inner relationship with God. It refers to aspects of our life that go beyond the material. It concerns aspects of our lives that lie deeper than the physical and material. It suggests that we are seeking to find a way to communion with God or to the deepest realities of human life, to realities that we easily miss but that are there to be discovered.

What happens when we consider such ideas in light of Scripture, and particularly the Old Testament? In thinking about that question, we might begin with the question how the Old Testament talks about the spirit. Thinking about that question involves asking how it talks both about the human spirit and about the Spirit of God. And one assumption that the Old Testament suggests is that there is an essential correlation between those two, between thinking about the Spirit of God and about the human spirit. You can't understand the human spirit without understanding the Spirit of God; you can't understand the Spirit of God without understanding the human spirit.

The Hebrew word most often translated "spirit" is *ruach*, while the equivalent Greek word in the New Testament is *pneuma*. Both words cover wind and breath as well as spirit, which reflects the fact that they suggest something dynamic and forceful and something essential to life. These meanings, wind and breath and spirit, are related, and the Bible sometimes plays on the link between them. Ezekiel 37 does so in vision of the valley of dry bones, where Ezekiel summons the *wind* to come and *breathe* on some corpses, which stands for God's *spirit* coming back into Israel. Jesus does the same thing in

John 3, where he speaks of the *wind* blowing where it wishes and God's *spirit* being the same, and in John 20, where he *breathes* on the disciples and God's *Spirit* comes into them.

So the spirit of a person isn't the inner, immaterial, still, central part of a person, remote from outward, this-worldly life. A human being's spirit is the vital life that pushes the person into action. It 's the person's energy, drive, and power. It shows itself in decisiveness, activity, excitement, and courage. A person of spirit is someone who can see what needs to be done and can do it, no matter what obstacles lie in the way. And because the meaning of *ruach* is connected with drive and power, of all the Old Testament's descriptions of humanity it is the one that takes us closest to God. God is the ultimate in energy, drive, power, decisiveness, activity, effectiveness. Thus, as the human spirit expresses the personality and drive of the person, so God's spirit encapsulates God's personality and drive. Indeed, "spirit" is a word that suggests God's God-ness. What distinguishes God from human beings is spirit. Isaiah 31 comments that 'the Egyptians are human and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit'. But God breathes his spirit into us, so that you can also say that what *links* God and humanity is spirit. Indeed, it's sometimes difficult to be sure whether a passage is referring to God's spirit or ours, and one reason is that the spirit is the link between God and us. Our spirit is God's liveliness and energy in us. God's spirit is the dynamic power God shares with us. Job 33 and 34 talk about the way God breathes his spirit into us in creating us. God then sends his spirit upon us or into us in a new way in working through us.

God's spirit is God himself in action. The Old Testament talks about God being involved through his Spirit in creation, in the history of the world, in creating individuals, in people's lives, in renewing the world, in redeeming Israel, in directing them, in dwelling among them, in guiding them, in judging them, in renewing them.

So thinking about spirituality would involve thinking about the involvement of God's spirit with us. I want to look at this question in the Old Testament by looking at a particular passage that raises many of the questions one would need to think about. It's from Isaiah 63. It's one of only two passages in the Old Testament that use the actual phrase "holy spirit." I want to see what happens if we read this passage with the question of spirituality in kind.

First, it reminds us that spirituality is based on what God has done for us.

Listen to Isaiah 63, verses 7-9.

7 I will recount the Lord's acts of commitment, the Lord's great praise,
Because of all that the Lord bestowed on us, the great goodness to the
household of Israel,
That which he bestowed on them in accordance with his compassion and
the greatness of his acts of commitment.

What was it that started off God's relationship with Israel? Often Christians assume that God's relationship with Israel was based on their being obedient to the law, as if they were justified by works, or thought they needed to be. The Old Testament doesn't talk in those terms. The relationship between God and Israel was based on God's grace, not on something they had done. This passage in Isaiah 63 starts from the idea of God's commitment to us. It uses the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is often translated "steadfast love," but I think the nearest word we have in English is the word commitment. It's the Old Testament's equivalent to the special word for love in the New Testament, *agapē*. Occasionally the Old Testament does talk about the need for Israel to show commitment to God, but it much more often talks about God's commitment to Israel. That was what started off their relationship with God. God made a commitment to them. It was true about God's

relationship with Abraham. As Paul point out in Romans 4, Abraham's relationship with God wasn't based on something Abraham did. God gave Abraham his promises before Abraham did anything. When God did lay hold on Abraham he made promises to him; and God's relationship with us, too, is based on God's promise not on what we do

Then when God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, it wasn't because the Israelites had been serving God faithfully. It was because of God's commitment, Isaiah 63 says, and because of God's compassion. In Deuteronomy Moses reminds the Israelites that it wasn't because they were a very impressive people that God took hold of them and brought them out of Egypt. They weren't very big as a people and they weren't very righteous as a people. The reason why God chose them and acted in love toward them was simply the love that emerged from within him, and the fact that he had made those promises to Abraham. Old Testament spirituality is not only based on God's promises; it's based on God's fulfillment of his promises. Abraham had to believe in God's promises just because God made them. Israel had to believe in God's promises because they had seen the fulfillment of them. As Christians we are in the same position as Israel, but also in the same position as Abraham. In the New Testament Paul says that all God's promises find their "Yes" in Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of some promises, so we live in light of what he has done. But there are other promises that have not yet found fulfillment, and he is the confirmation of those promises. We can look to the future with confidence not because of what we ourselves might be able to do but because of what God is going to do, things we are certain about because of the way God has fulfilled promises already.

That point applies to us individually and as a people. Spirituality concerns the life of the individual and the life of the people of God. Stage one involved an individual, Abraham, and maybe you came to know Jesus as an individual, you found Jesus as your personal savior. But God turned Abraham

into a people and it was a people that God then worked with and through. It's easy for our relationship with God to be mainly focused on us as individuals, but when God got to work in the world in order to bring about its redemption, he got involved with a people.

There's another point I should make about this aspect of spirituality, about its being based on what God has done. If the reason why God chose Israel wasn't its size or its righteousness, was that choice simply arbitrary? Doesn't God care about other peoples? The story of God's choosing Abraham makes the answer clear – or at least, it makes half the answer clear. It gives no reason for God's choice of Abraham in particular, but it does make clear that God did not choose Abraham in order to exclude other peoples but in order to include other peoples. God intended to bless Abraham so that other peoples would come to seek the blessing that Abraham experienced. And that has worked. As people who believe in Jesus, we are the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the nations by blessing Abraham.

So God doesn't give you the backward reason for choosing Abraham, but God does give you the forward reason. It's the same as the way the Bible deals with the question of why suffering happens to us. My first wife had multiple sclerosis for forty three years, and I don't know what was the cause of that happening, but I do know something of the purpose God achieved through it in the way God ministered to other people through Ann's illness. I don't know why God has opened your eyes to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus, when there are millions of people in Manila who have not yet seen it. I do know that the reason why God opened your eyes is not just so that you may enjoy it but so that you may be the means of opening other people's eyes.

Old Testament spirituality is based on what God has done for us.

Second: Old Testament spirituality is based on the fact that God remembers us, that God is mindful of us.

Here are the next few verses from Isaiah 63.

- 8 He said, 'Yes, they will be my people, children who will not be false.'
 So he became a deliverer for them; 9 in all their trouble it became
 troublesome for him.
 His personal aide – he delivered them; in his own love and pity he
 restored them.
 He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.
- 10 But they – they rebelled, they hurt his holy spirit.
 So he turned into an enemy to them; he himself fought against them.
- 11 But he was mindful of the days of old, of Moses, of his people.

Here's one insight for spirituality from those verses: spirituality is based on hopes that God has for us. Isn't that statement an interesting one, that God said, 'Yes, they will be my people, children who will not be false.' God thought that Israel would be his people, that they would not be false to him. How wrong God could be! But surely God always knows what is going to happen? Surely God doesn't get caught out? I assume God indeed could have known what was going to happen, yet it seems that God had somehow turned his eyes away from it. If he had kept thinking about how Israel was going to fail him, would he have bothered with them at all? Maybe God needed not to think about how they would actually turn out.

But God had had hopes for them. God has hopes for us. God has hopes for the church. I confess that it would be easy for me to run out of hopes for the church. We have lots of scandals and failures that could make me lose hope. But God doesn't lose hope for his church. I could lose hope for me, I could

think that I will never change. But God has hopes for me, God has hopes about me. So God stays with us and keeps working with us.

We're all aware of the fact that we are sinners. Some Christians make too much of that fact; some Christians don't think about it enough. Now ask yourself: which group do you belong to? Then ask someone else what they think about you in that connection. Often Christians who think it's really important for us to be aware of our sinfulness are the people who really need to be aware of God's mercy and to be reminded that they are doing quite well in their commitment to God. And often Christians who emphasize God's grace and think they are committed to thinking and walking in God's way are the people who need to examine themselves.

The same is true of the church, as it was of Israel. Israel sometimes needed to be reminded of its rebelliousness and sometimes needed to be reminded of God's grace. In Isaiah 63 it's very aware of the way it rebelled against God, and it has a striking way of expressing the point. It says that the Israelites hurt God's holy spirit. That's the first of the two times the passage refers to God's holy spirit.

"Holy spirit" is a striking expression. It's almost as if the passage is saying the same thing twice. We've seen already that talking about God's spirit means talking about the very God-ness of God. God's spirit is God in his very God-ness, God in his dynamic nature with the force and the liveliness of the wind. But then the prophet adds the word "holy," which is kind-of odd, because "holy" is also a word that denotes the very God-ness of God, God in his supernatural, heavenly, awe-inspiring nature as the one who is different from us. So the phrase "holy spirit" says the same thing twice - it's a double reference to God's awe-inspiring God-ness.

So the Israelites hurt God in his very God-ness. Now if Israel had commented on God's being offended or made angry by the Israelites' rebelliousness, you might not be surprised. But what the prophet says is that God got hurt. It's the same back in Genesis. When Genesis describes the effect of the world's sin on God, it never says that humanity made God angry. It does say it made God hurt, grieved.

In Genesis and here in Isaiah, God's hurt does have the effect of making God lash out; hurt can have that effect. It made God fight against the Israelites. The prophet is talking specifically about the way God had turned against Israel in the story that's related in the books of Kings. Eventually Israel's rebelliousness made God inspire the Babylonians to come and destroy the city of Jerusalem and take many of its people as refugees to Babylon. The prophecy comes from after that event and it looks back on it. Yes, God got angry all right; but only temporarily. Because then God thought about the old days, remembered the days of old, he was mindful of what he did in the time of Moses. And he knew he couldn't carry on that way. Because he remembered. Over against Israel's rebellion and God's hurt and God's punishment is the fact that God remembered.

The idea of God remembering also goes back to Genesis. The Bible's first explicit references to memory refer to God's remembering. After the flood, "God remembered Noah." Then, when God made a commitment to Noah and the new humanity after the flood, God promised, "I will remember my covenant between me and you." The story of Hannah, one of my absolute favorite stories in the entire Bible, shows how prayer involves appealing to God's capacity to remember. When we make commitments, it's easy for us to put them out of mind later, and we may think we are right to do so. The classic example is that of marriage, when half the people in our culture who make a lifelong commitment to someone else realize that they can't keep it, they have to go back on it. One of the problems about being God is that you

can't act in that way. God remembers. Here in Isaiah, God remembers what he had started at the time of the exodus, and knows he can't stop now. God looks at us and knows what he has started with us, and knows he can't stop now.

When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, God did not remember his footstool, Lamentations says. The heavens are God's throne and the earth is his footstool, you see. God sits in the heavens in glory and puts his feet up on the earth; specifically Jerusalem is the place where he puts his feet up. But when its people turned to other gods, when they declined to keep God in mind, God returned the compliment and put Jerusalem out of mind. If God remembers you, you are secure; if God decides to forget you, you are finished.

But God can't finally forget Israel. In the account of God's words at Sinai in Leviticus 26, God anticipates the idea that Israel will be incurably rebellious and that he will need to punish them, but then he says he will remember his commitment; evidently forgetting will not be final. He makes a similar statement when the exile has happened, in Ezekiel 16. When the Israelites face the facts about their relationship with God, God will remember the covenant with their ancestors. The encouraging aspect to these references to God's memory is that God's memory operates in a positive way in connection with the people's wrongdoing. God made commitments that it was impossible to get out of even if Israel thumbed its nose at God. So God is still committed to the Jewish people and still committed to the church and still committed to you and me despite the way we fail to keep our side of the commitment.

Therefore Israel can pray in Isaiah 64, "Don't remember waywardness forever." And part of God's response is to say in Isaiah 65,

The former troubles will have been put out of mind; they will have been hidden from my eyes.

Because here I am, creating a new heavens and a new earth.

The former things will not be remembered; they will not come to mind.

God has forgotten the sins that led to the exile and the trouble that these sins led to. God's memory is selective. God's mind is now all on the future. God is going to create a heavens and a new earth. He's not talking about a new cosmos, exactly – there's no need of a new cosmos. There's nothing wrong with the cosmos. The context makes clear that God is talking about a new Jerusalem, a new city, a new community there. God will forget the nasty aspects of the past and give people a new future.

Old Testament spirituality is based on the fact that God remembers us, that God is mindful of us.

Third: Old Testament spirituality is based on our remembering what God has done.

Here are the next verses in Isaiah 63. It's Israel that is speaking.

11 Where is the one who brought them up from the sea, the shepherds of his flock,

Where is the one who put in its midst his holy spirit,

12 Who made his glorious arm go at Moses' right hand,

Who divided the water before them to make for himself a lasting name,

13 Who enabled them to walk in the depths, like a horse in the wilderness, so that they would not stumble,

14 Like a beast in the vale that goes down, so that the Lord's spirit would give it rest?

Thus you drove your people, so as to make for yourself a glorious name.

I have suggested that God's remembering is very important to Old Testament spirituality. But so is our remembering. After referring to God's remembering, Isaiah 63 moves to talk about Israel's remembering. It doesn't use that word, but remembering is what it is talking about, because it pictures Israel asking questions about the contrast between how things are and how they once were. Spirituality involves facing the contrast between the way things are and the way they once were.

The first indicator that remembering is an important theme in the Bible is the simple fact that Scripture is dominated by the story of what God did with Israel over the centuries and what God did in Jesus and in the early church. Neither Genesis nor Matthew begins, "Remember this story," but that's the implication of their telling their story, and it's the implication of the Jewish and Christian community's letting this story dominate their Scriptures. It presupposes the importance of being mindful of the story on which your faith is based. In addition, the Scriptures tell the story on which the faith is based in such a way as to write into it the story's significance for the people who tell the story and the people who listen to it.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I went to hear two singer-songwriters who were Christians but who were playing in an ordinary Hollywood club. One had made a song out of the story of Jesus' stilling the storm, but the song simply paraphrased the story; it didn't have any point of contact with twenty-first century California. The other singer began by telling us that her aim in her singing was to give people hope, and she sang a song about hope, but she didn't make any reference to the fact that Jesus is the reason for our hope. It was just a song about hope. It seemed to us that expressing the gospel in song required something that combines the strength of the two songs – the strength of retelling the Bible story with the strength of contemporary linkage; not just retelling and not just contemporary application, but the two combined.

Often the study of theology drives you into the first of those – it is just the investigation of something that happened historically. You may then live your life on a wholly other basis, on the basis of the natural instincts of someone in the United States or the Philippines in 2012. Which means you end up in the same place as that other singer-songwriter, who was more obviously conforming to her culture. It's easy for spirituality to conform to our culture. We need the application of our memory to the story on which our faith is based to rescue us from the concerns that we have because of the context in which we live.

If you want to live in hope, as that second singer-songwriter wanted people to do, then remembering is of foundational importance to you. For Israel, Passover each year brought that fact home. In the United States, our key festivals are New Year, the Superbowl, Valentine's Day, Spring Break, Mother's Day, Memorial Day, Father's Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. I guess you have an equivalent set of key festivals in the Philippines. Wouldn't it be different if we seriously celebrated Advent Sunday, Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascension Day, and Pentecost?

Remember the story on which your faith is based. It's been said that no biblical command is as persistent as the command to "remember." It's an overstatement, but it is not much of an overstatement. My wife tells me she has heard it said that actually the most common command in Scripture is "Don't be afraid" (I should tell you that I have discussed the topic of this paper with Kathleen a number of times, and the good bits come from her). There would be a link between these two commands, remember and don't be afraid. The person who remembers the wrong things, who remembers how much the enemy has achieved and forgets what God has done before,

may be the person who is afraid. The person who remembers the right things may be the person who can avoid being afraid.

So it's not merely important to remember things; it is important to remember selectively, like God. Many therapists encourage us to relive our memories, and such reliving can be a means of healing. Yet a continual reliving of past memories can be a means of prolonging trauma rather than moving beyond it. It is said that depression comes from living too much in the past, while anxiety comes from living too much in the future. Maybe we should reformulate the aphorism. Depression comes from living in the wrong aspects of the past, anxiety comes from living in the wrong aspects of the future, or from living in the future in a way that ignores certain kinds of fact about the present and the past.

Memory is always selective. So we have to train our memories to be selective in a wholesome way. An alcoholic told me that alcoholics are inclined to remember the good things about drinking, and they have to be trained to remember the bad things about drinking.

Admittedly that selectivity is a complicated business. Isaiah 43 bids people *not* to remember the former events, *not* to think about earlier events, because God is doing something new. Memory can hold you back. It can discourage you from expecting God to do something new, or disable you from recognizing something new when God does it. You can't imagine that the great things God did in the past could recur, or you can't get out of your head your own past failures. Whether it is the distant past or the recent past, God's acts of blessing or God's acts of destruction, don't let the past limit what you can believe could happen in the future.

Old Testament spirituality is based on our remembering what God has done.

Fourth: Old Testament spirituality involves calling on God as father.

Here are the last few verses from Isaiah 63.

- 15 Look from the heavens, see from your holy and glorious eminence.
Where are your passion and your acts of power, the cry from your heart
and your compassion?
Toward me they have restrained themselves, 16 when you are our
father.
If Abraham himself did not acknowledge us, if Israel himself would not
recognize us,
You, Lord, are our father; 'our restorer' is your name of old.

In our spiritual lives we have the confidence and the freedom of children relating to a father or members of a family relating to someone who has the resources to help them.

"You are our Father," the Israelites say. You don't find people appealing to God as Father in so many words very often in the Old Testament, and I'm not sure why that is. It's not because they think God is distant or that calling on God as Father is too familiar or that God is too distant to call on him as father; we'll see they wouldn't be working with that idea. Maybe it's that the idea of God being Father is too familiar an idea in their culture in the Middle East. Often it's the same in our culture.. People simply assumed that God was like a father. It was too easy an idea.

But here they do appeal to God as Father. They do so because they are afraid that their real fathers or ancestors, people such as Abraham and his grandson Jacob or Israel wouldn't recognize them as their children. The Israelites are in a sad state. They have been cast off by God because of their

rebelliousness, and their city has been destroyed, and they have been taken off into exile; they've been able to come back, but they've not been able to rebuild their city, and there still aren't very many of them, and the people around, the people in Samaria and Ammon and Moab and so on, are putting pressure on them, and their future doesn't look very bright. Abraham and Israel would look at them and hardly recognize them as their children. They feel fatherless. But they know they have a Father who is still committed to them even though they are in a sad state. "You are our father, if Abraham himself did not acknowledge us, if Israel himself would not recognize us. You, Lord, are our Father."

Now one of the things about being a child is that you can say what you like to your father – at least, if the family relationship is working well, you can. A child can come and batter on its father's chest about what it is concerned about, it can cry, it can shout, it can plead, it can do anything. That's how Israel is with God. The Psalms are full of people crying, shouting, pleading, speaking to God with astonishing freedom, freedom that Christians are hesitant to follow. Can you really talk to God in that way? Here's an example, from Psalm 44. "Wake up! Why do you sleep, Lord? Why do you hide your face?" You might think you can't say that kind of thing to God. But the Israelites knew God was their Father, and that children can say anything to their Father.

That's how it is in Isaiah 63. "Where are your passion and your acts of power, the cry from your heart and your compassion?" they ask. They are even bolder in a minute. "Why do you make us wander from your ways, make our mind become hard so that we do not revere you?" they ask. Then they appeal again to God's being their Father. "But now, you are our Father, we are the clay, you are our potter, all of us are the work of your hand. " You can say anything to your father.

Now admittedly your Father can also say anything back, and sometimes in the prophets God does. Here in Isaiah, after the Israelites have battered on their Father's chest, he answers back. In effect he says, "Excuse me? You're accusing me of not responding to you? When I have been holding my hands out to you all these years and you have not been responding to me?" God and Israel, you see, have a real relationship in which there is give and take, in which they can speak straight and God can speak straight. The mutual straight speaking shows what a strong relationship it is. If you're not sure of a relationship, you're not sure what you can risk saying. But in a healthy relationship, either side can say anything, because they know the relationship isn't fragile. It won't break. That's Israel's relationship with God, the relationship with God as Father that the Old Testament invites us into.

There's another term they use to describe God in Isaiah 63. As well as saying "You're our Father," they say "You're our restorer." It's the word usually translated "redeemer." The idea is this. Suppose you get into difficulties – say you don't get a good enough harvest and you won't have enough food to last through next year. And suppose you borrow to be able to live through the crisis. And suppose you have trouble paying off the loan. And suppose you and your family are in danger of losing your farm and ending up as someone else's servants instead of having your own farm. But then suppose that there is someone in your extended family who has the resources to help you with your debt and keep you and your family free and able to look after yourselves. That person is under a moral obligation to help you. The word that refers to them suggests they are a close relative and they are prepared to be your redeemer to get you out of the mess you are in and they are thus prepared to be your restorer, to get you back on your feet, to get you back into your proper position.

Ordinary human relationships in the extended family and in the community were supposed to work that way. And Israel took that idea and applied it to God. God is willing to treat you as part of his family, to give of his resources to get you out of the difficulty you are in, and thus to redeem you and restore you to the position you should be in. So Israelites could combine appeal to God as Father with appeal to God as restorer; and so can we.

Old Testament spirituality is based on what God has done for us, not on what we do to reach out to God. It's based on the fact that God remembers us, that God is mindful of us. It's based on our remembering what God has done. It's based on the fact that God is our Father, and that we can appeal to him as our Father.